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ABSTRACT

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COLLEGE FACULTY ATTITUDES TOWARD MERIT PAY

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Abstract

Tenured and probationary faculty at a midwestern state university were asked to complete a questionnaire containing 21 merit-related questions and 5 biographic-status questions. The typical faculty member preferred: (1) that 40% of their annual salary increment be allocated to merit; (2) that this merit component be controlled by their department according to departmental criteria; (3) that none of the merit increment be controlled at the college or the university level; and (4) that the merit be allocated more to teaching and research than to service. Fewer than 10% preferred a 100% merit system. Typical faculty members did not believe that a 100% merit system would encourage or stimulate them to improve their research, teaching or service performances, or to enhance either a sense of fairness about salary decisions or cooperation among colleagues.

If annual salary increments were approximately 4% (rather than 8% or 13%), most faculty favored a 20% merit component, rather than the 40% merit component associated with higher annual increases in salary.

College Faculty Attitudes Toward Merit Pay

The advantages and disadvantages of merit pay for teachers have been debated for most of the latter part of this century. In 1979, Paul Porwoll reported the results of a merit pay study that was carried out by Educational Research Service, Inc. for their 10 sponsoring, public school associations. Porwoll reported that: (1) merit pay for public school teachers reached a peak in the 1920s and resurfaced again in the 1950s; (2) that by the 1960s, approximately 10% of America's public school systems still had merit pay plans in effect, but that only 5.5% had plans in 1972 and only 4.7 had merit pay plans in 1978; and (3) that most plans lasted less than 5 years and had been dropped because of administrative and/or personnel problems.

In spite of a very limited history of success for merit systems for publicly paid teachers, merit pay plans seem to have considerable public support. The Gallup Polls of 1970 and of 1983 asked, "Should each teacher be paid on the basis of the quality of his or her work, or should all teachers be paid on a standard scale basis?" (Gallup, G., 1984, 33-34). In the 1970 poll, 58% of the public supported differential pay, 36% favored a standard scale, and 6% "didn't know." In the 1983 poll, 61% supported pay for quality of work, 31% favored a standard scale, and 8% didn't

know. Both President Reagan and President Bush have frequently and publicly supported merit pay for teachers.

When public school teachers were asked for their opinions, the results are considerably more negative. In 1974, a poll of teachers by Alec Gallup produced opposition to merit pay by 67% of the elementary teachers and 62% of the high school teachers polled.

The opinions of college faculty toward merit pay or "differential performance" pay has not been the focus of the kinds of large scale surveys or public opinion polls such as those conducted by Porwoll (1979) and the Gallup organization. Partin (1984), Wood (1977), and Shreeve, Radebaugh, Norby and their associates (1985) have described functional merit pay systems in operation at the college level, and authors such as Centra (1979) and Miller (1972) have presented various evaluation systems that might work well with college and university faculty. In an economic analysis of school performance Hanushek (1989) concluded that ". . . school decision making must move away from traditional . . . policies to ones providing performance incentives" (page 45).

Does merit pay at the college and university level offer advantages that don't seem to operate satisfactorily at the pre-college level? What are the attitudes of faculty that have experienced a range of merit pay procedures that they themselves

have designed? What suggestions do such experienced faculty have regarding the allocation of merit pay across the three traditional functions of teaching, research, and service? Do such experienced faculty believe that merit pay policies have a positive or a negative effect upon their own major academic functions?

The major purpose of this report was to obtain opinions regarding merit pay and its effects from a group of faculty that had had the opportunity to experience a range of departmentally controlled merit procedures for several years. The choice of a merit policy or no merit policy was not totally under this group's control since the central administration and a faculty senate instituted the policy. However, the exact procedures by which the policy operated were totally under the separate control of each individual department (or similar academic unit).

Method

The subjects for this study were 420 full-time faculty of a midsized (17,000 students) midwestern, publicly-supported university. All full-time, tenure-track faculty (N=703) were asked to respond anonymously to a single mailing of a multi-page questionnaire. Approximately 60% (n=420) did respond with usable questionnaires within two weeks. Responses came from each of the institution's six colleges. Eighty-three percent of the responding faculty were tenured; 24% were assistant professors; 34% were associate professors; and 41% were full professors.

College teaching experience ranged from 1 to 40 years with a mean of 17 years and a median of 18 years. Years of experience at this institution ranged from 1 to 38 with a mean of 14 years and a median of 15 years. All had experienced at least one year of the operations of the merit policy that had been in effect, in one form or another, since 1974.

The Measure

A 26-item questionnaire was constructed by one of the authors who was aided by six other members of a Faculty Senate subcommittee. Twenty-one of the questions asked for faculty opinions concerning merit or differential performance pay. The remaining questions asked faculty to indicate their college affiliation, rank, tenure status, and years of experience. The various questions are included as a part of the results section of this report.

Results

Percent of Annual Increase that Should Be Allocated to Merit?

Question #1 asked, "In your opinion, approximately what percentage of any annual increase should be allocated to differential performance or merit pay?" The mean response was 40.1%; the median response was 40.0%; the major modal response (representing 19.3% of the respondents) was 40%; and the minor modes were 0% (drawing an 11% response), 20% (with a 14.5% response), 50% (with a 13.4% response) and 100% (with a 9.9% response).

When asked what merit percentage should be allocated under different salary increases, the suggested (median) merit component declined from 40% to 20% as the expected annual salary increment was reduced from 13% to 4%.

Expected Annual Salary Increment	Appropriate Merit % of the Increment			
	Mean	(SD)	Median	Mode
13%	40.4%	(29%)	40.0%	40.0%
8%	35.9%	(30%)	30.0%	40.0%
4%	29.1%	(33%)	20.0%	0.0%

What Academic Levels Should Control the Merit Pool?

The third set of questions asked "What percentage of the annual merit pool, if any, should be under the control of each (of three) academic levels?" The general responses are presented below.

Academic Level	Ideal Amount of the Merit Pool Under Control of this Level				
	Mean	(SD)	Median	Mode	(% response at Mode)
The Department	88.7%	(24%)	100%	100%	64% produced the modal response
The College	5.9%	(14%)	0%	0%	68% produced the modal response
The University	1.7%		0%	0%	86% produced the modal response

The majority (64%) of the respondents allocated no control of merit beyond the department. The remainder allocating limited amounts to higher levels. The minor modes were 95% to the department (4%), 90% to the department (8%), 80% to the department (7%), and 50% to the department (3%). A greater majority (86%) suggested no allocation of control to the University level.

How Restrictive Should Merit Be?

The great majority of faculty (89%) preferred "no restriction on the number or percentage of a unit's faculty to receive merit"--as opposed to an 11% vote for: "Units should provide merit to a limited number of their faculty." Several faculty wrote comments to clarify their positions on this issue. The typical comment appeared to say that merit pay should be restricted to those faculty who had earned it, but that all meritorious faculty should receive merit pay. The general feeling seemed to be in opposition to any pre-established limitation to the numbers or percentages of faculty entitled to receive merit pay.

How Should Merit Be Distributed Across Major Faculty Functions?

When asked "What percent of any merit pool should be allocated to the (three) major faculty functions?", the typical responses were as follows:

Function	Mean	(SD)	Median	Mode	(% Response at Mode)
Teaching	39%	(16%)	40%	40%	(34%)
Research	37%	(16%)	40%	40%	(33%)
Service	18.6%	(10%)	20%	20%	(39%)

The pattern appeared to follow the 40%-40%-20% distribution pattern common to many departments or units.

Effects of Merit Pay Upon Productivity, Performance and Environment

Ten questions asked faculty to agree or disagree with a set of statements. The statements and the associated response patterns appear below.

	Statements	Responses: Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neither Agree Nor Disagree (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)	Mean	Median	SD
1.	A 100% merit pay system would stimulate me to improve my scholarly productivity.	35%	15%	13%	15%	21%	2.7	2	1.6
2.	A 100% merit pay...improve my teaching.	42%	18%	20%	10%	10%	2.3	2	1.4
3.	A 100% merit pay...improve my service.	47%	20%	18%	7%	9%	2.1	2	1.3

(table continues)

	Statements	Responses: Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neither Agree Nor Disagree (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)	Mean	Median	SD
4.	A 100% merit... fairness of salary decisions.	58%	16%	10%	7%	9%	1.9	1	1.3
5.	A 100% merit... promote sense of cooperation among colleagues.	69%	15%	11%	2%	4%	1.6	1	1.0
6.	Merit pay systems tend to favor Research.	5%	6%	15%	29%	46%	4.0	4	1.1
7.	Merit pay systems tend to favor Teaching.	44%	27%	20%	6%	3%	2.0	2	1.1
8.	Merit pay systems tend to favor Service.	8%	3%	7%	34%	48%	4.1	4	1.2
9.	Different depts. should be with permitted to establish different criteria for merit.	15%	17%	16%	32%	21%	3.3	4	1.4
10.	I am satisfied with...dept. allocation merit.	32%	36%	24%	6%	2%	2.1	2	1.0

The majority (75%) reported believing that 100% merit pay systems tended to favor research (11% disagreed and 15% were neutral). A minority (8% to 9%) reported believing that 100% merit pay systems tended to favor teaching or service activities (with from 20% to 24% neutral).

A large majority (82%) reported believing that different departments <u>should</u> be permitted to establish different criteria

for merit (with 7% neutral and 11% disagreeing). A smaller majority (53%) reported themselves "satisfied with the manner in which my department allocates merit pay"--with 16% neutral and 32% dissatisfied.

Although most felt that merit pay favored research over teaching and service, fewer (36%) reported that a 100% merit pay system would stimulate them to improve scholarly productivity (13% were neutral and 50% disagreed). Somewhat fewer (20% and 16% respectively) reported that a 100% merit pay system would stimulate or encourage them to improve teaching or service.

Fairness and Cooperation. Although most faculty (53%) were satisfied with their department's current system, only a minority (16%) reported a belief that a 100% merit pay system would enhance their sense of the fairness of salary decisions. Fewer (only 6%) agreed that a 100% merit pay system would help to promote a sense of cooperation among colleagues (with 11% neutral and 84% disagreeing).

Differences Among Faculty

Major differences occurred within the various possible groupings of faculty with comparatively large ranges and standard deviations for most responses. For example, when asked "approximately what percentage of any annual increase should be allocated to differential performance or merit pay," 23 separate values were suggested. Although 40% was the most common or modal

value as well as the central or median value (40.4% was the mean value), over 11% of the faculty suggested 0%, many (14.5%) suggested 20%, and approximately 5% each suggested 10%, 25%, and 30%.

In response to the question "what percentage of the annual merit pool, if any, should be under the control of .... the university?" the very great majority (86%) suggested 0%. A similar question dealt with the College, and a majority of 68% suggested that 0% of any annual merit funds be under college-level control. The results clearly indicated that all merit funds should be under the control of the individual department or comparable academic unit.

There were no notable differences in beliefs as to departmental or college or university control over merit pay that could be attributable to college affiliation, rank or tenure status. All tended to favor departmental control.

Untenured faculty tended to report themselves as slightly more likely to be stimulated to research and service functions by a 100% merit pay system ($\underline{F}$=11). The faculty from different colleges tended to differ in their valuing of the research function (the two largest colleges suggested a 40% weighting; the two human services colleges suggested a 36% merit weighting and a 31% weighting; and the smallest college suggested a 35% merit weight. Faculty at a branch campus produced a mean weight of 27%

for the merit segment of the annual increment. There were no other notable differences across the various groups of faculty.

Conclusions

Faculty responding to the survey clearly preferred merit pay to comprise 40% of the annual salary increments, but only if the total increments stayed in the 8% to 13% range. When presented with the possibility of a mere 4% total increase, most faculty felt the merit portion should be smaller than 40%. Several comments seemed to suggest that as the increment dropped toward or below the expected increases in cost of living, the merit component should be reduced or even eliminated until salary increments exceeded the increases in inflation.

The majority of respondents clearly suggested that no control of merit funds should be extended above or beyond the department, that none of the merit money be allocated at the college or university level, that there be no restriction on the number of departmental faculty to receive merit, and that different departments should be permitted to establish different criteria.

The most commonly preferred allocation of merit money across faculty functions was 40% research, 40% teaching and 20% service--with some of the colleges preferring a greater and some a lesser focus upon research.

While most elementary and secondary teachers appear to oppose merit pay, a majority of these college faculty favored a merit

system. Although 11% of these experienced faculty thought that no money should be allocated to an annual merit pay system, 14.5% favored a system which would provide 20% of the total increments by merit, 19.3% favored a 40% system, 13.4% favored a 50% system, and nearly 10% favored a 100%-of-increment merit system. Unlike the majority of the public school teachers surveyed by the Gallups, all of these College faculty had had direct experience with a merit-pay system. Thus their opinions reflect real experience with the process. Most, however, did not believe that the merit systems that their departments had created were likely to lead to improved teaching, research or service. Most respondents also preferred merit systems that were under the control of their departments and that did not necessarily restrict merit incentives to any narrow range of especially meritorious faculty. A continuing dissatisfaction seemed to lie in the inability of the system to reward departments or colleges that were superior to other units--without depending upon the judgments of the higher administration or others outside the department.

Although the existence of some merit system was favored by most, few believed that merit systems would promote cooperation among faculty colleagues or improve the fairness of salary decisions. Although few seemed to perceive any real value to the merit systems that they worked under, few seemed ready to dismantle or expand a system to which they had become accustomed.

Additionally, the pattern of comments that were volunteered on the questionnaires--and to the authors in informal meetings--indicated that few really were satisfied with their systems or hopeful that any future system would be much better.

Why faculty generally found little worth in the merit system but were uninterested in changing it is an obvious curiosity. It may be that most faculty feel that any change would disadvantage them to some degree, or it may be that most departments had a system that rewarded everyone in some way. Removing the system might remove the rewards. Some may have felt that the system was so entrenched that eliminating or changing it would be highly unlikely, thus, maintaining the status quo would be the better alternative.

An interesting extension of the project would be to compare opinions about merit from faculty who have worked under a merit system (as we have) to faculty who have never worked under merit. The more negative reactions of public school faculty have been from people who usually have never worked under the realities of a merit system.

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Author Notes

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